

## Marian Studies

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Volume 55 *The Immaculate Conception: Calling and  
Destiny*

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Article 9

2004

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### Recommended Citation

Wright, Wendy M. (2004) "Saint Francis De Sales (1567-1622) and the Conception of the Virgin Mary," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 55, Article 9.  
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**SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES (1567–1622)  
AND THE CONCEPTION OF THE VIRGIN MARY**

*Wendy M. Wright, Ph.D.\**

On December 8, 1622, the “Feast of the Conception of the Virgin,”<sup>1</sup> less than a month before his untimely death, Francis de Sales preached a sermon to the nuns of the Visitation community at Lyons. The busy Bishop of Geneva was traveling with the Savoyard entourage on a diplomatic mission involving the courts of France and Savoy. That very day the French King Louis XIII had made his triumphal entry into the city. The preacher was weary but kept to his demanding pastoral schedule, including this liturgical celebration with the members of the religious community he had founded with Jane de Chantal a dozen years previously. Observance of this particular feast, the much admired Savoyard explained to his listeners, was not commanded by the Church. Nevertheless, it was recommended and its celebration would grant a plenary indulgence.

He began his sermon by first offering a brief instruction on the essence of the Catholic faith, and then plunged into a paraphrase of the Genesis narrative from which the doctrine of original sin is drawn. Thus, he concluded, “we are all conceived in sin.” But a caveat followed upon this sweeping statement. “Our Lady and Holy Mistress alone was exempt from this evil—she who was to conceive God first in her heart and in her spirit before conceiving him in her chaste womb.” The Virgin Mary was, he asserted, conceived the same way all human beings are but, as God had predestined her from all eternity to be

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<sup>1</sup> As was usual in his day, Francis de Sales used this term more frequently than the formal Immaculate Conception.

his Mother, God thus had exempted her from the stain of sin. Waxing to his rhetorical task, Francis de Sales suggested a vivid metaphor that would help his pastoral charges more clearly image the abstract idea of the Virgin's Conception.

Let me make a comparison in order that you may understand better. Do you know how pearls are made? (Many ladies desire pearls but they do not care about their origin.) Mother-of-pearl fish do as the bees do. They have a king and choose for that role the largest among them, the rest following him. They come on ocean waves when the air is freshest, which is at break of day, principally in the month of May. When they are all there they open their shells toward Heaven, allowing drops of dew to fall into them. They then clamp shut upon these drops in such a manner that they incubate this dew drop and convert it into a pearl, which is then considered so valuable. But notice, they close their shells in such a way that no salt water enters. This comparison will serve my purpose well. The Lord has done the same for the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, because at the instant of her Conception He placed Himself between her and sin—or rather, one might say, *under* her, to prevent her from falling into Original Sin. In the above example, if the drop of dew does not find the shell to receive it, it will fall into the ocean and be converted into briny and salty water. But if the shell receives it, it is changed into a pearl. In the same way the most holy Virgin was cast into the sea of this world by the common way of generation, but preserved from the salty water of the corruption of sin.<sup>2</sup>

The metaphor, along with its antiquated scientific allusion, may stretch the modern imagination, but the figure is typical of the genius of Francis, who was renowned for his communicative preaching. What it vividly conveys to the listener is a sense of Mary at her conception as a precious gem—a pearl—protected, nurtured even, in the safety of a sturdy enclosure. Although she floats upon the vast, briny sea of human existence, her original innocence remains fresh as dew; she owes her rescue to the one who, like the king of the fish, scoops her up before she can be cast into the salty waters of sin.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sermons of St. Francis de Sales*, Vol II, *On Our Lady*, trans. the Nuns of the Visitation, ed. Lewis S. Fiorelli, O.S.F.S. (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, 1985), 194–95. Original is found in *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, édition complète d'après les autographes et les éditions originales par les soins des Religieuses de la Visitation du Premier Monastère d'Annecy, 26 vols. (Annecy: Nierat, 1892–1964), X, *Sermons IV*, 399–411.

This essay will explore Francis de Sales' perspective on the Virgin Mary in its historical and biographical context, and probe in a special way his understanding of Mary's Conception. The particular view that the Bishop of Geneva took was situated in fertile soil: his Episcopal advocacy of the Catholic cause in the face of the continuing Protestant challenge of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, continuing controversies about the doctrine in Catholic circles, and his own deeply personal relationship with Mary. This latter was given shape by the Catholicism of the early-modern era and his Jesuit mentors, men who, as he, saw in the Virgin Mary both model and advocate for the two aims of reformed Catholic Christianity: the conversion of self and the conversion of society. In the end, however, it was Francis de Sales' unique spiritual vision of a world of hearts that would color his relationship to and view of the Virgin whose conception he celebrated with such joy.

### **The State of the Doctrine at the Turn of the Seventeenth Century**

The idea that Mary was at her conception preserved from original sin, an idea contested since medieval times when Franciscans and Dominicans lined up on positive and negative sides of the theological debate, was by the late-sixteenth century an idea commonly held among devout Catholics. At the same time, opposition to the doctrine continued in both Protestant and Catholic circles. The Council of Trent had made reference to the teaching but only noted that in the case of Mary, the Mother of God, a special exemption by privilege of God had been granted. The Tridentine teaching was not precisely defined. The council (Session V, On Original Sin, and Session VI, canon 23, On Justification)<sup>3</sup> simply affirmed that Mary was exempt from original sin by a special privilege from God.

<sup>3</sup> "This same Holy Synod doth nevertheless declares that it is not its intention to include in this decree, where original sin is treated of, the blessed and immaculate Virgin Mary, the mother of God. . . ." And "If anyone saith that a man once justified can sin no more, nor lose grace, and that therefore he that falls and sins was never truly justified; or, on the other hand, that he is able, during his whole life, to avoid all sins, even those that are venial—except by a special privilege from God, as the church holds in regard of the Blessed Virgin; let him be anathema." *Decrees of the Council of Trent*,

Reiterating arguments raised in the thirteenth century, the Council said that the privilege consisted in a protection by Providence which prevented the defection of her free will and that constant grace produced in her a perfect love of God.

During de Sales' lifetime (1567-1622) the debates, though muted, still went on. Echoes of the continuing controversies could be heard in contemporary papal pronouncements. In his 1617 bull, Pope Paul V forbade any public teaching that Mary was conceived in original sin. We know that Bishop de Sales rejoiced at the news of this proclamation.<sup>4</sup> And in 1622, the same year that Francis preached to the Visitation nuns in Lyons as well as the year of his death, Pope Gregory XV imposed silence on disputants of the doctrine until a formal definition could be arrived at by the Holy See.

The broader context of Tridentine affirmation of this special dignity afforded the Mother of God was the Protestant rejection of all things Marian beyond her spare biblical identity. Marian devotion was one of the foci of Protestant critiques and thus became a special locus of Catholic identity. By the time of Francis' birth, the religious fissure in Christendom was a painful reality. Europe was brutally scarred by the ongoing Wars of Religion. France especially was in the throes of conflict brought on by Huguenot/Catholic tensions. Francis was a five-year-old child living in neighboring Savoy when, on St. Bartholomew's Day, the massacre of over 3,000 Huguenots was engineered by Catholic loyalists and Catherine de Medici on the occasion of the Parisian wedding of her daughter Margaret de Valois to Protestant Henry of Navarre. It was that same Henry who, as Henry IV of France, converted to the Roman fold to secure his crown and who issued the Edict of Nantes which made provisions for France to have a dual religious identity. It was Henry as well who met Francis de Sales when he later came to Paris as a newly installed bishop. So impressed was the monarch by Francis' preaching, that he tried, unsuccessfully,

trans.Rev. James Waterworth (London: Burns and Oates/New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1848), 24 and 47.

<sup>4</sup> James Langelaan, O.S.F.S., *La Mère la plus aimée et la plus aimante: la sainte Vierge selon la doctrine de Saint François de Sales*, Studia Salesiana (Eichstätt: Franz-Sales-Verlag, 1965), 40.

to convince him to relocate in the capital. Finally, it was Henry who reintroduced the Society of Jesus into France after it had been out of favor. And it was the Jesuits and their lay associations, the confraternities, which spearheaded the integration of the doctrines and spirit of Trent into European society. As part of their evangelism, the Jesuits promoted Mary. For many of them, belief in her immaculate conception was a significant part of their evangelistic platform.

The Jesuits, as part of the Catholic wing of the reform of Christendom, championed traditional practices associated with Marian devotion as long as they accorded with reforming principles that ruled out superstition and unseemly excess. As Donna Spivey Ellington has shown, early-modern Catholicism, like its Protestant counterpart, reflected the transition of Europe from an oral to a literate society. The result was a more spiritualized understanding of faith. The stress was put on inward prayer and moral convictions more than external means of communicating with God. The Mary of the period was extolled as an exemplar of the new interiorized piety of the time; self-controlled, virtuous, especially humble and obedient, she was the mirror of what the model Christian was to be.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, traditional teachings about the Mother of God were given new, clarified emphasis by the early-modern Church. Marian doctrines were carefully articulated to give them their rightful place in the economy of salvation; theologians were careful to situate her in relation to Christological teachings. In the theology of early-modern Catholicism, for all her importance and the honor due her, it was from her Son that Mary received her true importance.

### **Francis de Sales and Marian Devotion<sup>6</sup>**

Savoyard Francis de Sales was very much a child of this early-modern Catholic world and as such gave special prominence

<sup>5</sup> On this, see Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001). Also see Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> For studies on Francis de Sales' Mariology, see Alain de Beudelievre, "La Sainte Vierge dans l'oeuvre de Saint François de Sales," *Etudes* 101 (1904): 675-795; Edward

and honor to Mary. There is evidence that he literally drank in Marian devotion with his mother's milk. His mother, Françoise de Sionnaz, as a young wife of the older Monsieur de Boissy, prayed at the church of Notre Dame de Liesse in Annecy that if she had a child, she would dedicate it to the service of God. Her prayer was answered with Francis' birth in 1567. That church and other Marian sanctuaries in the outskirts of Annecy, like that of Our Lady of Compassion at Boeuf, were Francis' familiar boyhood pilgrimage sites. It was, however, as a student in Paris that the young nobleman's Marian devotion flowered. In 1578, the year he would turn eleven, he was sent with two cousins to study in the French capital. His father's intention had been to have him study at the college of Navarre but Francis had learned of the reputation of the Jesuits for piety and reform and wished to attend their school. He entered their college of Clermont and studied there for almost ten years, first taking the course in humanities, then studying philosophy and theology. While he was there he became a member of the elite Sodality of Our Lady.<sup>7</sup> This fact is most significant.

The sodality at Clermont was part of the powerful network of congregations maintained by the Jesuits, many in schools, by means of which the re-conquest and transformation of society was to take place. The origins of the congregations can be traced to the year 1563 and the work of Jesuit Fathers Coster and, somewhat later, Luenis. The congregations were from the beginning explicitly Marian. Members were to be Children of Mary. They were to imitate her virtue by the purity

J. Carney, O.S.F.S., *The Mariology of St. Francis de Sales* (Eichstätt: Franz-Sales-Verlag, 1963); *St. Francis de Sales and Mary*, ed. Antony Kolencherry, M.S.F.S., *Studies in Salesian Spirituality* #7 (Bangalore, India: S.F.S. Publications, 1988), and Langelaan, *La Mère la plus aimée et la plus aimante*.

<sup>7</sup> On the sodalities and their Marian character, see John W. O'Malley, S.J., *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Louis Chatellier, *The Europe of the Devout: The Catholic Reformation and the Formation of a New Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), originally published as *L'Europe des dévots* (Flammerion, 1987); Joseph Stierli, S.J., "Devotion to Mary in the Sodality," *Woodstock Letters* 36 (1953): 17-45; Emile Villaret, S.J., *Abridged History of the Sodalities of Our Lady*, trans. William J. Young, S.J. (Saint Louis: The Queen's Work, 1957) and his *Les congrégations Mariales*, Vol. I, *Des origines à la suppression de la Compagne de Jesus (1540-1773)* (Paris: Beau Chesne, 1947).

of their doctrine and their conduct. Marian prayers punctuated their days: the *Salve Regina* in the morning, the *Ave Maria* in the evening, the rosary, the Little Office of Our Lady; all were either obligatory or recommended. Fasts were undertaken on vigils of principal Marian feasts. We know that at Clermont the Conception of Mary was observed in this way.<sup>8</sup> The baroque piety instilled by the Jesuits in their charges fostered control of the imagination. If a sodalist could not sleep at night, he was to bring Our Lady to mind and to meditate on the model of her life. In addition, there was a knightly quality to his devotion. Any slur, any dishonor to Our Lady was to prompt a sodalist to her defense. A dramatic example of this occurred during Francis' lifetime (although not when he was a student at Clermont): Huguenots protested when some sodalists—the fervent John Berchmans among them, to the praise of no less than Robert Bellarmine—promised to shed their blood defending the teaching of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>9</sup> That this doctrine was a lynchpin in Jesuit Marian devotion by the turn of the seventeenth century is clear. But it is also true that the doctrine was still contested. Only a few years before, the charismatic Jesuit teacher at Clermont, Maldonatus, not only had aroused the envy of competitor teachers at the Sorbonne because of his popularity but was also removed from his position because he was accused of denying the Immaculate Conception.<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of a sodalist's relationship to the Mother of God was the consecration he made to her. This consecration was not a formality but called for the loyal engagement of heart and mind over the course of a lifetime. In the oldest rules of the Roman congregations to which other congregations, including Clermont, were aggregated, is found the following formula:

Since the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, is the first patroness of this society, we can be confident that, as the Mother of Mercy, she will care for us in a special manner; moreover, since she loves those who have a love for her, it is expedient that the sons of this society should not only

<sup>8</sup> The different congregations all have different histories. All of what appears above can be documented to have occurred at Clermont during Francis' years there.

<sup>9</sup> Villaret, *Abridged History of the Sodalities*, 38–42.

<sup>10</sup> Villaret, *Abridged History of the Sodalities*, 20–26.



love and honor her in a special manner, but that they should also endeavor to imitate the example of her lofty virtues by the purity of their doctrine and of their conduct and to encourage one another to love and devotion for Mary by frequent conversation among themselves, and to cherish in their hearts a burning desire that her most holy name be ever more praised.<sup>11</sup>

At Clermont, Francis de Sales was chosen by his fellow sodalists to be prefect of their chapter, an honor and responsibility given only to youths who most exemplified the virtues held up in the congregations. Moreover, we have ample evidence of Francis' own tender and adoring relationship to Our Lady. We know that from December 1586 to January 1587, the serious young sodalist underwent a terrible crisis of faith.<sup>12</sup> A complex confluence of influences is cited as the source of this crisis. He was taking a course on *The Canticle of Canticles* from Benedictine scholar Gilbert Genebrard from Cluny, a course which would irreversibly shape his future spiritual vision. The course left him breathless with the realization that the divine-human relationship was a love story of inexpressible beauty. He also was encountering the great contested theological issues of his day, especially predestination, an idea for which Protestant thinkers found justification in Augustine and Aquinas. Added to this was a sensitive nature made more self-reflecting by the demanding vision put before him by Fr. Coster's book outlining the beliefs and behavior of an ideal sodalist, and then, complicating matters, he moved out of childhood into adolescence in a Parisian society saturated with glamour, temptations and worldliness. He became convinced that he was not to be among the saved. Most searing was his terror that he would be separated from God.

In his despair, he sought out the chapel of Notre Dame de Bonne Deliverance at the Dominican church of St. Etienne des Grès, a chapel he was wont to frequent after classes. There, be-

<sup>11</sup> Villaret, *Abridged History of the Sodalties*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> This crisis is much discussed and debated. A persuasive summary of the scholarship on the crisis, with Mary's place highlighted, is found in Marie Chantal Sbordone, V.H.M., "Mary's Role in the Faith Crisis of St. Francis de Sales," *Salesian Living Heritage* III/1 (spring 1988): 13-16.

fore the statue of the Black Virgin, he poured out his heart. "Am I to be deprived of the grace of him who has allowed me to taste and relish his gentleness and who has shown himself to me most lovingly? O love, O charity, O Beauty in whom I have placed all my affections . . . Will I never again delight in your presence? . . . O Virgin, most pleasing among all the daughters of Jerusalem, will I never then see you in the kingdom of your Son?"<sup>13</sup> He then made an act of heroic abandonment. He promised to love God always in this life to the fullest of his capacity, even if he might not be predestined to do so in the next. A tablet with the *Memorare* written on it was hanging from the chapel railing and he picked it up and recited it to the end:

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help or sought your intercession was left unaided. Inspired with confidence, I fly to you, O virgin of virgins, my Mother. To you I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in your mercy, hear and answer me. Amen.

At once his troubles, so it seemed to him, "fell about his feet as leper's scales."<sup>14</sup> In relief and gratitude he took a vow of virginity, placed himself under the Virgin's protection and promised to recite the rosary daily as a pledge of his immense gratitude. We know how faithful to that promise he was throughout his life. At the deposition given for the process of his canonization, his longtime friend and collaborator, Jane de Chantal, related that he spent an entire hour each day of his life "most lovingly" meditating as he told his beads.<sup>15</sup> The personal intimacy with Our Lady he felt as a youth did not diminish with age. "Everyone knew . . .," Mother de Chantal testified, that he "was deeply devoted to our Lady and loved and trusted her tenderly and as a son. He called her his Lady, his Queen, his Mistress. He

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in André Ravier, *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 32. Originally published as *Un sage et un saint: François de Sales* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth Stopp (Hyattsville, Md.: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1967), 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, 45.

never missed any opportunity of preaching in praise of her on her feast days and he spoke of her with fervor, ease and a special kind of joy.”<sup>16</sup> He saw himself as in Mary’s special care and confided to her alone his emerging desire to become a priest, a future that his father had not envisioned for him.

From the end of 1588 until 1592, Francis continued his studies at the University of Padua, taking classes, at his father’s insistence, in law. He also studied theology, taking Mary as protectress of his studies and the Jesuit Antonio Possevino as his spiritual guide. Known for his diplomatic activities undertaken in the re-evangelization of Protestant countries, Possevino was one of those fervent Jesuits for whom Mary was patroness for the Catholic cause and powerful intercessor, devotion to whom would ensure a fruitful apostolate. He encouraged Francis in his incipient priestly vocation. Some years later, when, as co-adjutor to the bishop of Geneva, Francis would undertake his own missionary journeys to re-evangelize the Chablais region, Possevino would send him a statue of Our Lady to ensure his successful mission.<sup>17</sup> In Padua the ardent student underwent another phase of his earlier crisis. This time the crisis over predestination would be more intellectual than affective. The intellectual crisis ended with his embrace of the view that God predestines all to salvation and provides sufficient grace to enable all to be saved. Human beings are free to reject or resist this grace. God then may or may not supply efficacious grace to provide extra help to overcome human resistance.<sup>18</sup> The student also struggled on the affective front, fending off the attentions of more than one attractive young woman. Upon the completion of his studies, with his virtue, his theological compass and his vision of himself as destined for a life in the Church intact, he prostrated himself at the altar

<sup>16</sup> *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Carney, *The Mariology of St. Francis de Sales*, 8.

<sup>18</sup> This position, which is described as Molinism (from the Jesuit Molina), was in contrast to the teachings attributed to Thomas Aquinas and Augustine. Francis prayerfully rejected these more “pessimistic” positions. Later, when heated theological conflicts over grace and free will between the Dominicans and Jesuits were referred to the papacy of Paul V, Francis de Sales was consulted. His solution, which was adopted, was to let the two systems co-exist.

of Our Lady in the church at Padua, remaining there two hours in thanksgiving. Heading home to Savoy, Francis stopped at the Holy House at Loreto, a favorite Marian shrine promoted by his Jesuit mentors. There he re-consecrated himself to the Word Incarnate and to the Virgin. His ardor was intense and he experienced there what commentators have described as an ecstasy; his sense of the love that this heavenly mother had for him prompted him to say, "Every time when I enter a place consecrated to this august queen, I feel by a certain thrill of heart that I am with my mother."<sup>19</sup> For Francis the school boy and Francis the grown man, Mary would always play this tender, maternal role. After his death, Jane de Chantal, recalled him as saying "how wonderful it is to be the child of such a glorious mother, however unworthy we are. She watches over us, we must go ahead bravely; if we are only the least bit devoted to her, she sees to it that we don't fail in what we undertake." Jane went on to recount that "he turned to her for everything he wanted and he advised his spiritual children to do the same."<sup>20</sup>

It was Mary he took with him on his first missionary journey after, overcoming family objections, he was ordained to the priesthood and made provost to the bishop of Geneva (1593). With Bishop de Granier, he resided in exile in Annecy, as Geneva itself had long been a Protestant city. His pastoral task was to re-instill the Catholic faith in a population that had recently been annexed to Catholic Savoy. Previously in Protestant territory, the Chablais had been acquired with a treaty that prevented Catholic observance. Duke Charles Emmanuel, with Bishop de Granier and the new provost, set out to win back the people to the Church. His devotion to Our Lady and his practice of promoting her cult as part of his evangelizing efforts was evident through Francis' four-year campaign. Calvinists had attacked a number of Marian shrines of the region, including Notre Dame d'Hermone, Notre Dame de Voirons and the Chapel of Notre Dame de la Vierge Noire. His

<sup>19</sup> Cited by M. Mariadas, "Saint Francis de Sales and Mary: Key-note Address," in *St. Francis de Sales and Mary*, ed. Antony Kolencherry (Bangalore: S.F.S. Publ., 1988), 13.

<sup>20</sup> St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal, 100.

desire was to restore these sites to their original integrity. Among his persuasive pastoral efforts, he celebrated the feast of the Our Lady's Conception with processions, and encouraged the recitation of the Angelus at dawn, noon, and evening (this latter he did himself kneeling with head covered). Eventually, the Sainte Maison or Holy House of Our Lady of Compassion was erected at Thonon and dedicated to the conversion of the Chablais; Francis was made its prefect.

Recalled from the missionary field, other pastoral responsibilities claimed the provost's attention. In 1602, with the death of Bishop de Granier, Francis succeeded to the episcopal office. He chose December 8, the feast of Mary's Conception, as the date for his consecration. It took place in the parish church at Thorens, where he had been baptized. Throughout his life he would remember this auspicious day as the one on which he received the greatest and most ecstatic grace of his life. Again, it is his friend Jane de Chantal who, in her deposition, provides a glimpse of his inner experience.

While it was going on, he said, he felt quite simply, that the Most Adorable Trinity was imprinting inwardly on his soul what the bishops were enacting outwardly on his person, and that he seemed to see God's most holy Mother taking him under her protection, while the apostles Peter and Paul were close beside him, watching over him.<sup>21</sup>

The practice of his episcopal household reflected the Savoyard's Marian devotion. The rosary was said in common after vespers, and for some time fasts were kept on the eves of her feasts.<sup>22</sup> As was his household, so was his diocese: Bishop de Sales promoted the Marian cult. The feasts of the Purification, Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity of Mary were designated as holy days of obligation. The Visitation and the Conception of Our Lady were considered feasts of devotion. The Angelus was instituted. In all the parishes of the diocese, two hours before the weekly catechetical instruction, churches or

<sup>21</sup> *St. Francis de Sales: A Testimony by St. Chantal*, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Jane, in her deposition, testified that he stopped the practice in order not to inconvenience his staff.

schools were opened and the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary were recited.<sup>23</sup> It was these two prayers that Francis declared to be necessary to faith. In addition, Francis gave approval to the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary to be active in the diocese and granted permission for the erection of churches and chapels dedicated to Our Lady. Many of the altars of these were consecrated in honor of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, thus giving prominence to these doctrines.<sup>24</sup>

### **Mary in Francis' Writings**

Francis de Sales was not a systematic theologian in the formal sense of the term. His first instinct was always pastoral. Nevertheless, his Marian doctrine, as his overarching spiritual vision, was remarkably integrated and theologically consistent. He never wrote a formal treatise on Mary or her virtues, as he did for St. Joseph,<sup>25</sup> but it is still possible to clearly discern the lines of his beliefs in his many writings. One might turn first to the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, de Sales' most popular work. It was intended for lay persons who wished to practice the love of God in the midst of their busy, workaday lives. To his many spiritual charges, the popular preacher and writer recommended devotion to Mary, especially entrusting themselves to her maternal heart. In the section that concerns "our duty to honor and invoke the saints," he recommended that his readers

Honor, reverence and respect with a special love, the sacred and most glorious Virgin Mary. She is the mother of our sovereign father and consequently she is our own Mother in a special way. Let us run to her and like little children cast ourselves into her arms with perfect confidence. At every moment and on every occasion let us call on this dear Mother. Let us invoke her maternal love and by trying to imitate her virtues let us have true filial affection for her.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Carney, *The Mariology of St. Francis de Sales*, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Carney, *The Mariology of St. Francis de Sales*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> On his treatise on St. Joseph, see *Sermon Texts on Saint Joseph* by Francis de Sales, trans. and ed. by Joseph Chorprenning, O.S.F.S. (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. John Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1972), book II, chapter 16, p. 106. The citation in the Annecy edition is III, Introduction, 104-105.

Mary as maternal presence, intercessor and guide is presented in the *Introduction* to all seeking to live the life of love, no matter their station in life. Francis de Sales' most ambitious work, however, was the *Treatise on the Love of God*. The *Treatise* was meant to be one volume of a four-volume work on love which, for the Savoyard, was the beginning, end and means of the entire Christian life.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the extensive exploration of "the birth, growth, decline, activities, qualities, benefits, and perfection of God's love" in the existing volume is quite ample to show much of his thought on the subject. *The Treatise on the Love of God* was written for persons advanced in the spiritual life; especially was it a reflection of the spiritual itineraries of Jane de Chantal and the sisters of the Visitation for whom Francis was spiritual advisor. The *Treatise* speaks not only of the nature of God's love for humanity but of the various ways human beings return this love. His discussion of the Conception of Mary in the *Treatise* occurs in the sixth chapter of Book II entitled "Charity Comes to Life" as he is discussing God's inexhaustible love for humankind. It serves as an example of God's love that is expressed in particular and providential ways.

### **Some Special Privileges of Providence in Man's Redemption**

Most assuredly, God gives a wonderful demonstration of the inexhaustible fertility of his power in that tremendous variety which meets our gaze in nature. However, he gives us an even more splendid vision of the untold treasures of his goodness in the unparalleled distinction of blessings that we discern in grace. He was not content—no limits set to his mercy—with sending his people (the whole human race) a collective impersonal redemption; he offers salvation to each individual. So manifold are the ways of it, his generosity glows through their variety, a variety which in turn enhances his generosity.

In the first place, he predestined for his blessed Mother a privilege worthy of the love of a Son who owed it to himself—all-wise, all-powerful, all-good as he is—to fashion a mother to

<sup>27</sup> Love of self, of friend, and of enemy were to be the other topics.

his own taste. Thus he determined that she should be redeemed in advance by way of prevention, so that the flood tide of sin, overwhelming generation after generation, should not rise to her. So surpassing was her redemption that the torrent of original sin, about to pour its ill-fated waves over her conception as violently as it did over the rest of Adam's daughters, halted in its course like the Jordan long ago in the time of Joshua and from a similar motive of reverence. The Jordan stemmed its flow out of reverence for the passing of the ark of God's covenant; original sin drew back its waters in reverence, in awe at the presence of the shrine that bore witness to God's eternal covenant.

In that way, then, God preserved his glorious Mother from sin's banishment, affording her the good fortune of both natural states: she knew the innocence which the first Adam lost, while she enjoyed the perfect redemption which the second Adam won. A garden chosen to give birth to life-giving fruit, she was in flower with every perfection. The Son of eternal love so adorned his Mother that she might stand at his right hand as the queen, in Ophir gold arrayed—in other words, the first of the elect to experience that “at thy right hand are delights that will endure for ever.” Set apart for the Son, this holy Mother was ransomed by him from all danger of damnation, guaranteed grace in all its fullness; her coming shone like the dawn of day, her path grew ever brighter, like the light of dawn opening out into full day. A wonderful redemption, the Redeemer's masterpiece, the prelude to all the rest, as the loving Son with happy auguries met his Mother on her way! He did not merely preserve her from sin, like the angels; he also preserved her from all possibility of it, from every distraction, every impediment to the practice of charity. Referring to his Mother, he declares that, of all rational creatures, of all his chosen ones, one there is beyond compare; for me none so gentle, none so pure! How graceful thou art, dear maiden, how fair, how dainty.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Francis de Sales, *The Love of God: A Treatise*, by Saint Francis de Sales, trans. and introd. by Vincent Kerns, M.S.S.F. (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1962), Book 2, chap. 6, 63–64. In the *Oeuvres*, the quote is found in *Traité*, 4:105–106. This is the only



With his rhetorical flourish, Francis depicts Mary's conception in this passage, using traditional imagery from the Book of Joshua (chap 3). She is the Ark of the Covenant that, like the original ark, crosses the torrential waters without getting wet; God's providence causes the rivers to cease flowing for her to pass. She is thus preserved from the flood tide of sin. Sorting through the bishop's dense metaphors that have been presented so far, his ideas about Our Lady's conception can be summarized in the following way. Being preordained to be the Mother of God, Mary was, by a singular privilege, preserved from original sin at the moment of her conception in her mother's womb. This was done through the prevenient application of Christ's merits to her. Hers was thus a preservative redemption. As a consequence, she enjoyed two states of human nature: the innocence which the first Adam lost and the advantages of redemption that the second Adam gained. The reasons Francis de Sales advanced in favor of the doctrine were traditional and reflect the arguments of Trent.<sup>29</sup>

Much of what he believed has become mainline Catholic teaching about the Immaculate Conception, although he did also hold some positions which are not so commonly expressed today. For example, Francis was very much a theological disciple of Duns Scotus and his disciples, including the Jesuit Francisco Suarez. It was the medieval Franciscan Scotus, of course, who championed the Immaculate Conception against Thomas Aquinas. Francis, like Scotists before him, taught that the Incarnation was preordained by God, not as a result of

extended treatment of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception that we have directly from de Sales' own hand. His sermons were generally written down by listeners and, while they can be seen as a fairly accurate reflection of what he said, they cannot carry the weight of a document that he poured over and revised.

<sup>29</sup> His argument runs thus: Our Lady was conceived without original sin 1) because the Church celebrates her birth and 2) she is predestined to be mother of God (Augustine). If the Church teaches that John the Baptist was sanctified in the womb, how much more so should this be true for Mary. The same will that willed the incarnation, willed that the mother of God be more excellent than other creatures. Mary was conceived by ordinary means, but was guarded from soiling. See Langelaan, *La Mère la plus aimée et la plus aimante*, 39ff. and 47.

God's foreknowledge of the fall and human sin, but as a more primary gesture of love, a divine desire to be in full union with created being. In this same vein, he also taught that God pre-ordained Mary from the beginning to be the Mother of God. His high valuation of her, his placing her in a position of honor, higher than the angels and other human beings, flows in part from this concept.

These were the foundations of his view. But the Genevan bishop was not content to leave the matter at that. His teaching on the Conception of Mary was not only negative but positive. In fact, much of his spirituality might be seen as an extended commentary on the positive aspects of Mary's privileges given at conception as they reveal human love fully realized. He taught that not only was Mary preserved from sin but that she was also gifted with special graces. At her conception she was given the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and was throughout her life protected from concupiscence and all danger of sinning. Further, following Suarez, the Savoyard taught that this wondrous girl had from the moment of her conception the full use of her reason. (He also taught that Jesus enjoyed the same privilege, and that John the Baptist was accorded this privilege at the moment when, in his mother's womb, he leapt in the presence of his Savior, also in the womb.)<sup>30</sup> According to him, the child Mary appeared to others as a normal child, but her humility was so deep she kept the full fact concealed. Further, her union with God was so intimate that she had vowed herself to God's service from her conception. Therefore, her preparation for God's service in the temple as a young girl, although arranged by her parents who saw their daughter's precocious religiosity, was not truly necessary, for she already enjoyed a full measure of grace and understanding of her role in the divine plan. Despite her precocity, de Sales taught that Mary did in fact grow in grace. While at her conception she was given the seven gifts of the Spirit, all the fullness of virtue that she possessed was nurtured and increased throughout her life.

<sup>30</sup> On this, see John Seward, *Redeemer in the Womb: Jesus Living in Mary* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

### Mary and the World of Hearts

While much of what he taught mirrored the thinking of his time, Francis de Sales also had his own distinctive relationship to the Mother of God, shaped by his vision of a conjoined world of human and divine hearts. Beneath all the specific things he had to say in the *Treatise* was a sustaining vision of a “world of conjoined divine and human hearts.”<sup>31</sup> Captivated by the poetry of the *Cantic of Canticles*, from which he drew compelling metaphors, de Sales pointed at divine love by describing God as a beating, breathing heart out of which creation flows and back to which creation is drawn. He saw human hearts, created in the divine image and likeness, as designed to breathe and beat with the same movement as the divine heart. In fact, he thought that it was in the heart that the divine image and likeness were most clearly discovered.<sup>32</sup> Flowing out (aspiration) and drawing in (inspiration), human hearts are made to beat with the heartbeat of God. Union with God, the beginning and end of all created being, is thus a union of hearts. But, as a result of sin, human hearts do not always move so and, hence, must be reclaimed for love’s full activation. As the divine-human heart of Jesus does beat in this intimate, synchronic way, so Jesus’ heart must come to indwell in each human heart. *Vive Jesus* (“Live Jesus”!) was the motto of the Order of the Visitation and is the central prayer of the spiritual tradition that followed Francis de Sales.<sup>33</sup> The Jesus who was to live in the heart described himself in the eleventh chapter of the gospel of Matthew: “Come to me and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matt. 11:28ff.). The ex-

<sup>31</sup> On Francis’ heart-centered vision, see *On the World of Hearts*; see also John A. Abruzzese, *The Theology of Hearts in the Writings of Saint Francis de Sales* (Rome: Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, 1985) and Wendy M. Wright, “That Is What It Is Made For: The Image of the Heart in the Spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal,” in *Spiritualities of the Heart*, ed. Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1990), 143–58.

<sup>32</sup> Bishop de Sales’ use of the word “heart” was biblical and referred not simply to feelings but also to the integrating center of the person where all the faculties converge.

<sup>33</sup> On the trajectory of Salesian tradition, see Wendy M. Wright, *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2004 / Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004).

change of human-divine hearts takes place through all the activations of love, but especially through the practice of what Francis called the little virtues: humility, gentleness, patience, kindness and the like.<sup>34</sup> God first loves, then prompts and provides human beings with the means to love in return. Jesus comes to live in the heart through all the practices of love, especially the little relational virtues.

It is apparent that the world of hearts that Francis envisioned was not simply vertical but also horizontal. Love did not become manifest solely between human and divine hearts but was realized between human hearts as well. Human hearts are drawn to the source of love—God—through the love of others whose hearts are inhabited by the gentle heart of Jesus. Love grows in relationship. In the Salesian world of hearts, preaching, teaching, spiritual guidance, friendship, and familial relations carried on with charity, gentleness and humility are the means by which human hearts grow in love and become aligned to the heartbeat of God.

Mary was the one human being, besides her divine-human son, whose heart, preserved from sin, beat most closely with God's. Her preservation (Immaculate Conception) meant that she was free to love fully, with all the expansiveness of which human beings are capable. She could truly "live Jesus." Thus Francis de Sales taught that, while Mary may have enjoyed special privileges, she was still the human model of the Spirit-filled Christian life. She grew in grace, and thus her life was morally imitable as well as worthy of special veneration. Especially was she the model for the life of perfection, the religious life. The Community (later Order) of the Visitation of Holy Mary that Francis co-founded with Jane de Chantal was designed not only to be a community that sang the constant praises of the Mother of God—at the center of their communal prayer was the recitation of the Little Office of Our Lady—but Mary was also their particular model. She was their spiritual abbess and mother superior. They were to practice *imitatio Mariae* by reproducing the virtues she exemplified. These were, as has

<sup>34</sup> There is no one authoritative list of the little virtues. The above are frequently mentioned.

been suggested, the virtues held up by reformed early-modern Catholicism, the little interior virtues. Mary was both model and mirror for the Visitandine in the practice of these relational virtues in the context of a community of mutual love.<sup>35</sup> It is not insignificant that Francis chose as the emblem of the Visitation a cross with a heart on which two initials—J and M—for Jesus and Mary, were engraved.<sup>36</sup> It is also not insignificant that the mystery of the Visitation was taken as the community's name. In that mystery, two women go about the ordinary tasks of daily life—a young pregnant girl visits her elder pregnant cousin. Mary carries within her God's own life. In the course of her visit, the transforming work of love which has begun in her becomes active. In her visit, Mary recapitulates God's visitation to her. This moment of that first visitation, as the angel announced the incarnation, was seen by de Sales as God's kiss to humanity. Mary's visit to Elizabeth reenacts that loving visit. And, as love is generative, the divine life hidden within is quickened and the work of transforming love goes on. Not only does Mary grow in grace but, through her visitation, so do Elizabeth and John the Baptist and Zachariah and Joseph, whom Francis imagines (in the manner of contemporary paintings) as present in the "Double Visitation." Their hearts too are transformed into the heart that goes out to them in love. At the Visitation, Mary's heartbeat beat in rhythm with the heart of God nestled in her womb. As Love gave itself to her, so she gives of herself. Her heart causes all hearts around her to be drawn into the divine rhythm.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Recent literature on the Visitation and its Marian identity is ample. See especially, Hélène Borde, "La méditation du mystère de la Visitation par François de Sales et l'esprit de l'ordre de la Visitation," *Visitation et Visitandines aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Actes du Colloque d'Annecy, 1999), études reunites et présentées par Bernard Dompnier et Dominique Julia, C.E.R.C.O.R., Travaux et Recherches XIV (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2001), 69–88.

<sup>36</sup> Hélène Bordes, "Quelque aspects de la première iconographie du Coeur de Jesus," *Sainte Marguerite-Marie et le message de Paray-le-Monial*, ed. R. Darricau and B. Peyrous (Paris: Desclée, 1993), 349–378.

<sup>37</sup> On the double visitation, see Joseph Chorpenning, O.S.F.S., "Connecting Mysteries: The Visitation and the Holy Family in the Salesian Tradition (from St. Francis de Sales to the *Année Sainte* (1867–1871)," in *La Sagrada Familia en el siglo XIX: Actas del Cuarto Congreso Internacional sobre La Sagrada Familia . . . de 1998* (Barcelona: Hijos de la Sagrada Familia/Nazarenum, 1999), 811–33.

### The Love of the Lover and Beloved

Bishop de Sales' discussion of the Conception of Mary found in the *Treatise* (which was written between 1609-1616) may be his most extended and clear treatment of the theme, and his 1622 sermon, quoted at the beginning of this paper, may offer the most baroque metaphor for understanding it, but a plan for a much earlier sermon for the feast on December 8, jotted down in 1608, gives us a further intimate look at the Bishop's love for Mary and his vision of her in the world of hearts. The plan is very suggestive and it is not always possible to see how the preacher will move from one idea to the next, but the overall point is clear. The Latin notation on the manuscript is from his own hand: "For the Feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the anniversary of my consecration."

*My Beloved is mine and I am his. He pastures his flock among the lilies.*  
[Cant 2:16-17]

The great love which Our Lord has for Our Lady and by which he makes her all his own is brought about by her being reciprocally all his own, and as a result she was never stained by even the slightest sin. His Divine Majesty longs to make us all his own. You see that I am about to deliver a sermon full of love, but that I could not do so unless the Holy Spirit, celestial love itself, inspire me, and [unless] She, who by the Spirit has received more love than any other creature, obtain that grace for me.

All the fathers hand down to us in these words proof of the immense and mutual love of Bridegroom and Bride. There is no question about this point. Thus, the love of the Bridegroom for the Bride: *My Beloved is mine*; and the Bride for the Bridegroom: *and I am his*. As Christ is the Bridegroom, although we could never doubt his love, let us nevertheless, for our consolation, consider the evidence of his love for his Mother.

The first sign of love is an affective union, that of the will. That is why Christ says: *If anyone loves me, he will keep my word* [John 14:23]. *Anyone who says that he loves God and does not keep his commandments is a liar* [1 John 2:4]. They are not *one heart and one soul* [Acts 4:32]. *Jonathan's soul was knit with the soul of David* [1 Sam 18:1 / Vulgate 1 Kings 18:1]. That is why St. Augustine, in book 4 of his *Confessions*, chapter 6, praises him who calls his friend "his second self," because by the mutual union born of affection, a friend is another self. . . .

Now, about Jesus being united to his mother: *he was submissive to them* [Luke 2:51], always conforming his will such as a much beloved spouse might. She, on her side was intimately bound to Christ: *Set me like a seal on*

*your heart* [Cant. 8:6]. And this other text: *I sleep but my heart keeps vigil* [Cant 5:2], signifies the Virgin's heart toward Christ. And this one: *A sword of sorrow will pierce your soul* [Luke 2:35], Hugh [of St. Victor] interprets this as the soul of Christ which is Mary's soul; thus near the cross she remains standing, *held captive* [Cant 7:5] *as a lily among the thorns* [Cant 2:2].

The second sign of love is from Philippians 1: *because you have a permanent place in my heart* [v.7]; it is an intimate conjoining. *Jonathan's soul was knit* [1 Sam 18:1/Vulgate 1 Kings 1:1]; *my soul clings to you* [Psalm 663:8/Vulgate 62:9]; *it is good for me to cling to my God* [Psalm 73:28/Vulgate 72: concl.]. Such was the love of Naomi and Ruth. However, the union of Christ with the Virgin was greater than the Virgin's with Christ; *my beloved is mine* [Cant 2:16]; *I will seek him whom my heart loves* [Psalm 3:2]; *who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* [Romans 8:35 RSV]; *I am crucified with Christ crucified* [Galatians 2:19].

Third sign, ecstasy or rapture. Dionysius the Areopagite, [book] 4 of *The Divine Names*, says that Christ underwent ecstasy as he entered the Virgin's womb; *I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, firstborn among all creatures* [Ecclesiasticus 24:5]. In her turn, the Virgin was taken outside herself; *For me to live is Christ and to die is gain* [Philippines 1:21 RSV]; *I live but not I* [Galatians 2:20] . . .

The fourth is zeal, which is twofold; lusting, as the zeal which aspires to titles and honors, because these goods are limited, this sort of zeal is called envy; friendship, that which protects a friend against evil. This zeal comes to fullness in the Virgin. For God's house: *who is scandalized [a stumbling block] and I am not on fire?* [2 Corinthians 11:29]. The zeal of Christ for the Virgin; *Set me as a seal on your heart* [Cant 8:6]; *a garden enclosed* [Cant 4:12]; *Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines, for our vineyards are in flower. My beloved is mine* [Cant 2:15-16].<sup>38</sup>

The poetry of the *Canticle of Canticles* saturates the outlined piece. Its central scripture sings out what the preacher will preach: "My beloved is mine and I am his." The sermon promises to be a rhapsodic hymn on the reciprocal love of Jesus and Mary, Son and Mother, lover and beloved, creator and creature. Although we cannot know the fully developed text of his sermon, we can draw out its intent from the skeletal notes with some assistance from Francis' other writings. For him, the reciprocal love of God and humankind is paradigmatically discovered in the

<sup>38</sup> Sermon LXXIV, Notes for a sermon for feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 1608, unedited. *Oeuvres* 8; *Sermons* 2:28-31.

union of the hearts of Mary and Jesus. Their love is expressed first by a union of wills. Mary responded in love to God's loving will that humankind be intimately united to its source, Love Itself. The angel announced; she responded, "Thy will be done." Teasing out the import of the Lucan passage with imagery from the *Canticle*, in the *Treatise* as well as at least one of his sermons, Francis spoke of the Annunciation as God's kiss to humankind.<sup>39</sup> Mary was the willing recipient of that chaste yet fruitful kiss. Joined in will, Mary and Jesus shared one heart. This was evident in their mutual condescension. Jesus as a child in Mary's house was submissive to her will. She on her part, was intimately bound to him in his suffering; her heart was pierced with suffering love, just as his was broken for humankind on the cross.<sup>40</sup> The conjoining of their two hearts was permanent and total. And, it was ecstatic; it took them out of themselves. Jesus' incarnation was divinity's ecstatic, kenotic gesture of love, a wooing of humankind. Mary's yes was also ecstatic. It was both a passionate response and a self-emptying. It took her out of herself; she gave herself to and became inhabited by the one she loved. Finally, the zeal to do and be for the other became the shared object of their one life. It is instructive that Francis describes the Virgin's zeal here in terms of friendship, that most mutual and equal of all the loves. Mary and Jesus' zeal was shared: they desired to let love flow and breathe and beat and move with its intrinsic dynamism. That happened by going out to others, loving as they had been loved—tenderly, gently, unreservedly. Loving as one would a second self, a friend. Even to giving one's life for the friend. The intimate and varied ways that Francis de Sales imagined the reciprocal love of Mary and Jesus can be summed up in the phrase: they had one heart.

Francis de Sales saw Mary's Conception as a result of her pre-ordained maternity. It was part of the divine mystery of an unfathomable reciprocal love for which humankind was created. "My beloved is mine and I am his"; this is the text on which the youthful bishop chose to preach on the eighth anniversary of his own

<sup>39</sup> March 25, 1621, Sermon XLVI on the Annunciation, *Oeuvres* 10; *Sermons*, 4:41.

<sup>40</sup> The idea that Christ died not of the damage inflicted by the crucifixion but of a broken heart was a traditional one. It was carried into the tradition of Sacred Heart devotion.



consecration. It was for this full realization of the divine will—that creator and creature be joined in a union of love—that Mary was chosen and given special privilege. Through this privilege, her love became the fullest expression of human love possible. “She was *all his own*,” Francis wrote, “and as a result she was never stained by sin.” She was what humankind was created for—humankind’s guide in the arts of reciprocal love, because she was fully free to love. She was, as Francis wrote in the Treatise, “the Redeemer’s masterpiece, the prelude to all the rest.” Mary was the one from whom all were to learn how to enjoy the reciprocal love to which all are called.<sup>41</sup> For Francis, her spiritual son from childhood, she was the most tender, gentle and lovely mother, the practitioner of the little virtues, the perfect embodiment of the world of divine and human hearts of which he wrote so eloquently.

<sup>41</sup> It will come as no surprise that the coat of arms that Bishop de Sales designed for the Visitation community was a single heart pierced with two arrows, surrounded by a crown of thorns, topped with a cross and the names of Jesus and Mary. Jane de Chantal and her spiritual daughters were, like Mary, to let Jesus live in them, to be one heart, one soul with one another and with their beloved Lord. Mary was model for each human heart as it lets Jesus live in it, all the while glorifying and rejoicing in the love of its creating and redeeming God.